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AUTHOR Anderson, Robert W.; Tollefson, Nona
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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine whether parents of gifted daughters would emphasize social variables and parents of gifted sons would emphasize accomplishments and achievement (academic variables) in comparing their child to others and in making decisions about activities in which their child would participate. Parents (N=107) of boys and girls enrolled in programs for gifted students in grades K-12 completed a questionnaire on which they indicated the degree to which they agreed with statements about their child's performance in academic and social activities. They also indicated the criteria they used to make decisions about academic and social activities in which they would encourage their child to participate. There were no statistically significant differences in the mean item responses to the questionnaire for parents of boys and girls. Parents emphasized social comparisons (i.e., parents assigned greatest importance to their child's "fitting in socially" with children in their age group). Parents reported that they were most likely to make decisions about whether their child should participate in an activity based upon whether children not enrolled in gifted programs would be participating in the academic or social activity. Results did not support the premise that parents reinforce different sex role orientations for daughters than for sons. (27 references) (JDD)

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Social Comparisons: To Whom Do Parents of Gifted Boys and Girls Compare Their Children?

Robert W. Anderson and Nona Tollefson

The University of Kansas

Mail Correspondence to: Nona Tollefson
2 Bailey Hall
The University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045

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Abstract

Parents of boys and girls enrolled in programs for gifted students in Kindergarten through grade 12 completed a questionnaire on which they indicated the degree to which they agreed with statements about their child's performance in academic and social activities. They also indicated the criteria they used to make decisions about academic and social activities in which they would encourage their child to participate. There were no statistically significant differences in the mean item responses to the questionnaire for parents of boys and girls. Parents emphasized social comparisons. They reported that they were most likely to make decisions about whether their child should participate in an activity based upon whether children not enrolled in gifted programs would be participating in the academic or social activity. The results of the study did not support the premise that parents reinforce different sex role orientations for daughters than for sons.

Do Parents of Gifted Students Emphasize Different Sex Role Orientations for Their Sons and Daughters?

The last twenty years have seen an increased interest in sex role expectancies for men and women. This interest has lead to a redefinition of the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Traditionally, sex role orientation was assumed to be a unidimensional characteristic (Beere, 1979). However, work by Bem (1974) and Spence and Helmreich (Spence & Helmreich, 1978; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975) has lead to conceptualizations of the masculine and feminine sex roles as multidimensional and independent. Current conceptualizations of sex roles emphasize the masculine orientation toward instrumentality (self-assertion and self-protectiveness) and the feminine orientation toward expressiveness (selflessness and need to identify with others) (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978; Spence & Helmreich, 1980).

Differences in sex role orientations of boys and girls have been used to explain differences in course enrollment patterns, post high school achievements, and overall self-esteem (Anderson, 1989; Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Benbow & Stanley, 1980; Fennema & Sherman, 1977; Hollinger, 1985a).

Girls consistently report lower interest and ability in mathematics than do their male peers (Brush, 1980; Fennema & Sherman, 1977). Fitzpatrick (1978), who studied the relationship between achievement and acceptance of traditional women's roles, found that bright, adolescent girls who were other-directed and

accepted traditional women's roles were more likely to be underachievers, particularly in the area of mathematics. Furthermore, a survey of programs for gifted and talented students indicated: (a) that more boys than girls were referred for gifted programs, (b) that fewer girls than boys were enrolled in secondary programs for gifted students, and (c) that girls tended to accept far less public recognition for their work than boys did (Anderson, 1989).

Girls receive many of the highest grades in school; however, they rarely match males in post-college achievement (Reis, 1987; Silverman, 1986). Furthermore, measured intelligence has been found to correlate positively with expectations for success with boys and negatively with expectations for success for girls (Clark, 1983). Several different explanations have been offered for this discrepancy between girls' achievement in school and their achievement in life. The use of energy in interpersonal relationships is frequently cited as one of the reasons why women do not attain the same level of success as men having comparable records of achievement in school (Leder, 1984). Comparison of scores on the Personal Attributes Questionnaire showed that girls placed greater emphasis on social values than did boys who tended to place greater emphasis on theoretical values (Fox, Pasternak, & Peiser, 1976; Helmreich, Spence, & Wilhelm, 1981).

Fear of success and a lack of planning (termed "absence of instrumentality" by sex role theorists) (Helmreich, Spence, & Holahan, 1979; Helmreich, Spence & Wilhelm, 1981; Spence & Helmreich, 1978, 1980) are other frequently cited reasons for the discrepancy between women's achievement in school and their later

life attainments (Hollinger & Fleming, 1984; Lavach & Lanier, 1975). Lavach and Lanier (1975) found a strong motive to avoid success among seventh through tenth grade girls when the competition was with boys or when the competition was in a traditionally masculine field. These findings are examples of the fear of success motivation frequently attributed to adolescent girls and to women.

Literature on sex differences in self concepts shows that the male self concept includes perceptions of potency and energy, perceptions consistent with a sex-typed, masculine orientation. The female self concept includes perceptions of nurturance, sensitivity, and sociability, perceptions consistent with a sex-typed feminine orientation (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Researchers (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) have labeled the masculine gender schema an instrumental orientation and the female gender schema an expressive orientation.

According to gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), a person's self concept and related perceptions of skills and abilities are assimilated into his/her gender schema. Self esteem is hypothesized to be related to the degree to which the individual's perceptions of his/her abilities correspond to his/her gender schema standards.

Ruth and Richards (1974) and Leder (1984) argue that the media present different views of what constitutes success for mean and women. Ruth and Richards (1974) suggested that girls continually encounter the idea that the successful woman is a physically-beautiful wife/mother, while boys hear a message that describes a successful man as someone who has a record of personal success and accomplishment. Leder (1984) reviewed articles in the

Australian press about outstanding men and women in fields other than sports. He noted that articles on women focused on the need for women to work harder than men and to balance work and interpersonal relationships. He also noted the tendency for women to attribute their success to luck. None of the articles about men reported that men felt they needed to work harder to compete effectively with competent women, nor did the articles describe men who attributed their success to luck.

Studies of sex role orientation have focused on the general school age population, and few studies have targeted students in programs for the gifted. In one study, Kramer (1985) observed and interviewed 10 gifted girls of middle school age over a 6 month period. The girls said that being in the gifted program, which involved their removal from the regular classroom one day a week, made them targets of confusing and often uncomfortable expectations from teachers and peers and that they chose behaviors that enabled them to "fit in" with their classmates. The girls attributed their success in school to being liked by the teachers and to effort rather than ability. The girls also reported that they associated being a "real brain" with social incompetence and that they tried to avoid being labeled a "real brain." Teachers spoke about the difference between their personal definition of giftedness and the characteristics of the girls in the gifted program. Specifically, teachers reported that the gifted girls rarely volunteered answers or made comments in class which from their definitions of giftedness they would have expected gifted students to do. Teachers believed

that the girls did not volunteer to prevent themselves from being singled out more than they already were.

Furthermore, there has been little systematic study of differences in parental expectations for gifted boys and girls, and the literature provides little guidance in separating the impact of parental expectations and societal expectations. Cornell (1983) studied the reaction of parents to learning their child was labeled "gifted" and the subsequent effect of the label on family relationships and interactions using a quasi-experimental research design. He found that mothers were usually the first to perceive a child as gifted. If there was disagreement among the parents about whether the child was correctly labeled, it was the father who disagreed with the "gifted" label. Parents who accepted the label were prouder of their child than were parents of children in the control group, but their pride focused on their child's social skills and maturity, rather than on the child's scholastic accomplishments.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of the present study was to investigate whether there were differences reported by parents who had sons and daughters enrolled in programs for gifted students (a) in level of satisfaction with their child's academic and social development and (b) in the criteria parents reported that they used to make decisions about whether their children would participate in particular academic and social activities. A secondary purpose of the study was to learn if the criteria parents used differed by type of community in which the family lived, the grade level of the gifted child, or the family income.

The literature on sex role orientations would lead one to predict that parents would emphasize social variables in making comparisons that involved their daughters and that they would emphasize accomplishments and achievement (academic variables) in making comparisons that involved their sons. Furthermore, it was predicted that parents would place higher importance on social criteria when making decisions about the activities in which their daughter would participate than when making decisions about the activities in which their sons would participate.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of parents of 107 students enrolled in gifted programs in urban/suburban, suburban, and rural counties in a midwestern state. The guidelines for eligibility for participation in a gifted program in the state were an IQ of at least 125 on an individually administered intelligence test and achievement scores at or above the 95th percentile on a standardized achievement test. Occasionally, with proper documentation, students who did not meet the above criteria are also placed in a gifted program.

Fifty-four respondents were parents of girls and 53 were parents of boys. Twenty-three parents had children in the primary grades (kindergarten through grade three), 64 had children in the intermediate grades (grades four through six), and 20 had children enrolled in secondary grades (grades seven through twelve).

In the urban/suburban county, parents were randomly selected from those whose children participated in programs for gifted children; 58 parents resided in the urban/suburban district.

In the suburban area (a mid-sized town with a population of 12,000) and in the rural county, parents of all students in the gifted programs were asked to participate. Twenty-one parents in the sample resided in the suburban county, and 28 parents lived in the rural county. Six families reported incomes under $15,000; 68 reported incomes between $16,000 and $45,000; 24 stated incomes between $45,000 and $75,000; and eight parents reported incomes over $75,000. One parent did not report income.

As is typical of studies of this type, most respondents were mothers. Status characteristics (i. e., age, educational level, number of children, birth order of the child in the gifted program, number of children in the family served in a gifted programs) of the respondents are not known. The school districts in which the study was conducted would not authorize the collection of such status information from the parent sample.

Instrument

Parents completed a Social Comparison Survey (SCS) (Anderson, 1989) which includes 13 statements divided into two sections. Section I, patterned on the social comparison scale developed by the Family Perceptions Research Project (1988), had nine items that measured parents' feelings about their child's progress in academic and social areas. All of the statements required comparisons of a child in a program for gifted students to children in a gifted program or a regular education program. Following are some sample items: "I wish my child were more like children who are not enrolled in a gifted program". "My child seems to be making more academic progress than other students in the gifted program". Parents

responded to these items on a four-point Likert scale, where 4 equaled strongly agree and 1 equalled strongly disagree.

In the second part of the scale, parents indicated the frequency with which they used five criteria in making decisions about the academic, social, or extracurricular activities in which their child would participate. The criteria were: (a) whether gifted students would be participating, (b) whether students not in a gifted program would be participating, (c) whether their child wanted to participate, (d) whether the child's teacher recommended that the child participate, and (e) whether other children in the family had participated. Parents responded to each alternative using a four-point frequency scale where a "4" was assigned to "almost always," a "3" to "most of the time," a "2" to "rarely," and a "1" to "never."

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to students who took them home and asked their parents to complete them. A cover letter explained that the study was concerned with gifted children and some of the social pressures and expectations that affected these children.

Data from the surveys were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance procedures (MANOVA). Separate analyses were conducted for the independent variables of gender, type of community, grade level, and income level. Two hypotheses were tested: (a) There are no significant differences in the mean item scores for the social comparison items for parents of boys and parents of girls, and (b) There are no significant differences in the

mean scores for the five decision-making criteria for parents of boys and parents of girls.

Results

Initially, means and standard deviations were computed for the nine items in Part I of the SCS. (These data are reported in Table 1.) Parents expressed the strongest agreement with items that assessed their children's social skills: "I wish my child was more like other children not in a gifted program." "I am pleased that my child fits in well socially with other students in the gifted program." "I am pleased that my child fits in so well socially with other children who are not in a gifted program." Two items assessing students' academic achievements received the lowest mean item ratings. These items were: "My child seems to be making more academic progress than other students in the gifted program," and "It doesn't make me feel any better about my child's academic progress to think about other children who are not in a gifted program."

Insert Table 1 about here

In Part II of the survey, parents were asked to indicate the factors they considered when they made a decision to permit their child to participate in an academic, social, or extracurricular activity. For the five criteria assessed, the criterion of whether or not the child wanted to participate received the highest mean frequency rating. The criterion of whether other students not in a gifted program would be participating in the activity received the second highest mean frequency rating. The pattern of using students not in the gifted program as a referent group was also evident in parents'

responses to a global social comparison item that asked parents to indicate whether they were likely to compare their child to students in the gifted program or to students not enrolled in a gifted program. The most frequent responses to this questions were comparisons to other boys or girls not in the gifted program.

In the second stage of data analysis, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were used to test for significant differences in mean item responses to the nine items in Part I of the SCS. Gender of the student was the independent variable in this analysis, and responses of parents to items in Part I of the SCS were the dependent variables. The analysis yielded no overall significant difference in mean item responses ($F = .515$, $p > .05$). Parents of boys and girls did not differ significantly in their mean responses to Part I of the SCS.

Secondary analyses using grade level, residence, and income level as the independent variables and item scores for the nine items in Part I of the SCS as dependent variables also failed to yield significant multivariate Fs. Parents of kindergarten through high school students residing in urban/suburban, urban, and rural community with different levels of family income did not differ significantly in their mean responses to the social comparison items on the SCS.

Analysis of parents' responses to Part II of the SCS yielded significant differences in mean responses to the items assessing factors that parents used in making decisions about the academic, social, and extracurricular activities in which their children would participate. When grade level was the independent variable, significant differences in mean responses to the option assessing the

frequency with which parents considered "whether children not in the gifted program would be involved in the activity" as a basis for making decisions were observed ($F = 4.04$, $p < .05$) Table 2 depicts the mean scores by grade level for the frequency with which parents used participation in the activity by students not enrolled in a gifted program as a criterion to decide whether their child should participate in an academic activity, a social activity, or an extracurricular activity.

Insert Table 2 about here

Data in Table 2 show that parents reported that they assigned high importance to whether children not participating in the gifted program would be engaging in the activity when they make a decision about whether their child would participate in an academic, social, or extracurricular activity. Mean scores were, in all but one case, above 3.0 on a 4-point scale. In general, parents of primary and secondary level students were least likely to use participation of students not in a gifted program as a factor in deciding whether their child would participate in an academic activity. However, they were more likely to consider this factor when making decisions about their child's participation in a social or extracurricular activity. Parents of gifted students in intermediate grades reported that they considered participation of students not in a gifted program as an important factor "most of the time" in making decisions about whether their child participated in academic, social, or extracurricular activities.

Discussion

This study first addressed the question of whether parents of girls participating in gifted programs made different types of social comparisons than did parents of boys participating in gifted programs. Parents of both boys and girls assigned greatest importance to their child's "fitting in socially" with children in their age group. Parents also reported that they would be most likely to consider whether children not enrolled in the gifted program would be participating, when they decided upon the academic, social, and extracurricular activities in which they would encourage their child to participate. The results of the present study indicated that the parents responding did not differ in the types of comparisons they made depending upon whether their child was a boy or a girl. Parents of both boys and girls endorsed the importance of social criteria in the social comparisons that they made. These findings parallel results of an earlier study by Cornell (1983) who found that parents of gifted children placed greater emphasis on their children's social skills and maturity than they did on their children's scholastic accomplishments.

Further support for the finding that parents place strong emphasis on their child's ability to relate to students not enrolled in a program for gifted students is provided by the analysis of the effects of grade placement on the criteria that parents use to make decisions about the activities in which they encourage their child to participate. This analysis indicated that a significantly stronger emphasis was placed on the criterion of participation of children not enrolled in a gifted program in the selection of academic, social and

extracurricular activities for students enrolled in the middle grades than for students enrolled in either the elementary or high school grades. The importance of social acceptance to adolescence is well documented in the literature. Parents also assigned high level of importance to participation in activities that interested the general school population.

The literature reviewed for this paper suggested that boys and girls experience different social expectations, and the present study was developed from the premise that these differences in social expectations might be explained in part by differences in the criteria parents use to make judgements about the accomplishments of their sons and daughters. The findings of this study did not support the assumption. Parents reported that they did not use different criteria when they make judgments about the accomplishments of their sons and daughters. Furthermore, they reported that they used the same criteria to make decisions about the academic, social, and extracurricular activities in which their sons and daughters would participate. The criteria they used were their child's preference and whether students not enrolled in the gifted program would be participating in the activity.

Finding that gifted girls do not seem to be receiving different messages from their parents than the messages received by gifted boys, raises interesting questions for future research. How do students in programs for gifted and talented students develop their beliefs about what constitutes success? Do they follow the criteria used by their parents and compare themselves to other students not enrolled in gifted programs or do they make comparisons to their

gifted peers? What do they view as indicators of success: academic achievement, social achievement, or some more personal criteria? In a closely related vein, are questions about how teachers define success for students in gifted programs. Kramer (1985), in a study of a very small sample of girls enrolled in a gifted program at the middle level, found that teachers had definite ideas about what gifted students should be able to accomplish and about how gifted students should act and react in the classroom. Further study employing a larger sample of teachers would provide additional information about teachers' expectations for gifted students enrolled in their classes.

Finally, there is a need to collect general incidence information about the post-secondary achievements of students labeled as gifted. The literature reviewed for this paper (See Reis, 1987 and Silverman, 1986), indicates that girls' post high school achievements rarely match the achievement that would be predicted from their high school grades. However, specific information about the post high school achievement of girls who participated in gifted programs is not available in the literature. Such information would provide a basis for further investigations of the post high school accomplishments of girls enrolled in gifted programs.

Table 1

Item Means and Standard Deviation for SCS for the Total Sample

Items (Part I)	M	SD
I wish my child was more like other children not in the gifted program.	3.32	.71
I am pleased that my child fits in well socially with other students in the gifted program.	3.29	.65
I don't compare my child with other children.	2.53	.69
My child seems to making more academic progress than other students in the gifted program.	2.06	.43
I feel good about what my child can do academically in the future when I see what other gifted students are doing in their program.	2.92	.67
I am pleased that my child fits in so well socially with other children who are not in a gifted program.	3.25	.69
When I compare my child with other children who are doing better academically, I feel bad that my child isn't making more progress.	3.13	.70
My child is making about the same academic progress as other gifted children.	2.89	.44
It doesn't make me feel any better about my child's academic progress to think about other children who are not in a gifted program.	2.32	.68

Responses to Part I were on a 4-point scale where 4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = disagree.

Table 2

Item means and standard deviations for Part II of the Survey

To what extent are your decisions about whether to encourage your child to participate in an academic project or class influenced positively by the following criteria?

	M	SD
Gifted students will be participating	1.68	.68
Students not in a gifted program will be participating	3.38	.73
Child wants to participate	3.45	.63
Teacher recommends child participate	2.86	.69
Other children in the family have participated	1.89	.86

To what extent are your decisions about whether to encourage your child to participate in a new social activity influenced positively by the following criteria?

	M	SD
Gifted students will be participating	1.63	.70
Students not in a gifted program will be participating	3.40	.74
Child wants to participate	3.43	.66
Teacher recommends child participate	2.02	.90

To what extent are your decisions about whether to encourage your child to participate in an extracurricular activity influenced positively by the following criteria?

	M	SD
Gifted students will be participating	1.51	.61
Students not in a gifted program will be participating	3.46	.66
Child wants to participate	3.47	.65
Teacher recommends child participate	1.99	.93

Responses to Part II were on a 4-point scale where 4 = almost always, 3 = most of the time, 2 = rarely, and 1 = never.

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